

By spending so heavily on new vaccines, she said, the alliance "runs the risk of compounding health inequities in the poorest countries." These new vaccines are being sent to countries which already have some vaccine coverage, whereas the poorest countries are still not receiving even basic immunisations, such as those against diphtheria, tetanus, and polio.

Gavin Yamey *BMJ*

Dr Hardon's report is at www.haileweb.org/pubs/hailehighlights/mar2001/index.html

International effort to find AIDS vaccine for India

India's health ministry and the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative have signed an agreement to accelerate efforts to develop and test an AIDS vaccine against HIV subtype C, the predominant strain in India.

Under the agreement, the initiative—which was set up in 1996 with money from UNAIDS (the joint United Nations programme on HIV and AIDS), individual governments, and private foundations—will invest several million dollars in the development of an AIDS vaccine in India. It will be similar to the modified vaccinia Ankara vaccine against HIV designed by researchers at the Medical Research Council's human immunology unit in Oxford, but appropriate for use in India.

"Essentially, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative will facilitate the transfer of technology so India can acquire a vaccine based on the modified vaccinia Ankara vector," Dr J V Prasada Rao, director of the National AIDS Control Organisation in India told the *BMJ*.

The initiative will fund the US company Therion Biologics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to design a recombinant vaccine based on the modified vaccinia Ankara vector and containing gene sequences cloned by Indian scientists from HIV subtype C in India.

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

1 in 4 pregnant women in South Africa has HIV

The South African government has released its annual figures on HIV and AIDS, which show a continued increase in the numbers of people contracting the virus. About 4.7 million South Africans currently have the virus, compared with 4.2 million in 1999.



A baby with HIV looks out of her cot in Johannesburg

Some 24.5% of pregnant women were infected with HIV, according to a survey of 16 548 blood samples in the year 2000. The equivalent figures for 1998 and 1999 were 22.8% and 22.4% respectively.

The government's claim that the rate of increase in the disease was slowing prompted questioning from several experts in the field. The controversy has arisen from the 1998 figure, which experts believe was an overestimate.

Several provinces showed a substantial rise in prevalence, such as Kwa-Zulu Natal, which showed a rate among pregnant women of 36.2%, compared with 32.5% in the previous year.

The most worrying increase was among young women in their late 20s, who showed a prevalence rate of 30.6%. The survey's authors noted that this group of women has consistently shown the highest rates of increase over the years.

Women aged under 20 showed a much lower prevalence rate (16.1%).

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

House of Lords supports first UK genetic database

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

Strong support for the Medical Research Council's proposal to establish a voluntary database containing the genetic details of 500 000 individuals came this week from the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology.

The committee also called for the setting up of an independent body, the Medical Data Panel, to safeguard the interests of individuals whose personal data are collected and held on genetic databases.

"The Data Protection Act 1998 offers significant protection to individuals over the use of their personal data. It is, however, the nature of research that there are always surprises around the corner," the report said.

It continued: "There may be future imperatives to use non-anonymised data in ways that could not be foreseen when samples are collected. It may often be impracticable . . . to consult individuals about this. Among our various recommendations, we propose a new independent body, the Medical Data Panel, to safeguard their interests."

Evidence for the report was collected by a subcommittee of the select committee, chaired by Lord Oxburgh, set up last July to investigate the present and future uses of human genetic databases. It took evidence from more than 55 medical institutions, drug companies, charities, and individuals.

The report expressed strong

support for the initiative from the Medical Research Council, with the Wellcome Trust and the Department of Health, to establish a large national database to study the interactions of genetic and lifestyle factors in the occurrence of disease.

The database, to be known as the UK Population Biomedical Collection, will hold details of 500 000 men and women volunteers, aged 45-64, including basic measurements, such as height, weight, and blood pressure, together with details of medical history and lifestyle from questionnaires.

Follow up data on the participants' health and lifestyle would be collected over succeeding years, and genetic analyses would be carried out on the volunteers by separate research groups, although the results would be held centrally to increase the value of the resource.

The report recommends that the government provide "sufficient earmarked resources to the MRC and the Department of Health to ensure that the support and infrastructure required for this important initiative are in place." Committee members said that it was urgent that the NHS should adopt uniform standards and protocols for medical records, so they could be used in research. □

Human Genetic Databases: Challenges and Opportunities is accessible at www.parliament.uk

Current benefits of advances in genetics

- The BRCA2 gene is being used as a predictive diagnostic test for breast cancer
- Gene profiling of leukaemic cells has enabled better targeting of treatments
- Better understanding of gene function improves our understanding of diseases—for example, the single gene cause of one form of muscular dystrophy affects the actions of 96 other genes
- 1100 disease related genes are documented on specialised databases, leading to new screening tests and improvements in diagnosis
- Genetic tests are available for a few drugs, such as fluoxetine, to help assess patients' suitability for treatment before prescription

Source: *Human Genetic Databases: Challenges and Opportunities*